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SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM THE SOUTHEAST,  
ERDOGAN SET TO WIN

REF: ANKARA 1410

Summary: Reftel reported the view from Ankara that AK Party and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems poised to win March 9 special election in Siirt. Indications from our contacts in predominantly Kurdish southeastern Turkey also point to a comfortable victory for Erdogan and AK. There are three seats at stake in Siirt. While AK officials in Siirt naturally predict a clean sweep, CHP representatives there hope to win one, or at most two seats. The province's most popular party, DEHAP, is furious at not being allowed to contest the election; acting apparently on instructions from headquarters, local DEHAP supporters are being informally urged to boycott or spoil their ballots. Widespread anxiety among Siirt Kurds about war in Northern Iraq and possible Turkish military involvement there does not seem to be pushing voters toward CHP in sufficient numbers to offset AK's advantage. End Summary.

1) Consulate Adana poloff toured Siirt Province March 4-5 to gauge trends prior to the March 9 parliamentary by-election. Siirt province likely has 80,000 voters. (Note: Like most other SE Turkey provinces, Siirt is almost entirely made up of ethnic Kurds, with the exception of small pockets of Turks sent to work for the Government and Turkish traders of Arab origin. Endnote.)

2) In all locals, (note: We toured the provincial capital, Siirt (est. population 100,000), and three smaller townships, Kurtalan (est. pop. 30,000), and Baykan (est. pop. 12,000) End Note.) in proportion to their size, the normal election-campaign apparatus and apparatchiks were on display: banners, pennants, posters, the occasional deputy or minister from Ankara shaking hands, and campaign buses cruising the streets blaring a mixture of slogans and music. We are unaware of any opinion polling going on in the province prior to the election.

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AK Predicting a Landslide  
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3) In conversations with AK Party officials at all locations, we found them almost giddy with a sense of imminent triumph. They are not going to be satisfied with a 3-0 sweep over their only serious rival, CHP. Rather, we repeatedly heard the figure of eighty percent as their predicted vote total. AK Party headquarters in all locations gave an impression of being hectic and chaotic, but flush with resources, including plenty of campaign workers.

4) It appears AK Party has indeed been applying its advantage as the party of government. Although we heard from AK Party officials about effective government, from other party officials and from random citizens we heard anecdotal evidence of how AK has been focusing resources on Siirt in the run-up to the election. For example, an isolated hamlet might finally get its road or its electricity repaired after many years of waiting. (Note: Road repair crews were in evidence as we drove around several towns.) Similar promises for future delivery of services are allegedly being made widely. In Erüh, one citizen said he had heard of (but not seen),

voters being bought - for as little as 50 million Turkish Lira (approx USD 30).

5) AK Party officials and supporters seemed unconcerned that the party and Erdogan specifically would pay a price at the ballot box in Siirt because of the government's, and Erdogan's, support of the defeated resolution concerning US troops coming to Turkey and Turkish troops in northern Iraq. As one party official somewhat disingenuously explained, "Mr. Erdogan is not in the parliament, so the responsibility cannot be assigned to him." Besides, he said, lots of AK deputies voted against the resolution anyway.

6.) One final factor that gives comfort to AK in Siirt is the depth of religiosity in the province. (Note: In Ottoman times Siirt was known for its holy men and shrines honoring them are unusually common. End note) The religious vote in Siirt will go for AK, to spite the secular CHP.

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CHP Gamely Hanging in There  
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7). In all CHP headquarters we visited, officials described a frustrating two-front battle. Firstly, they had to find a way to appeal to voters through ideas rather than through instant or promised "pork," which is the prerogative of the party in power. Secondly, they seemed to be getting nowhere in their personally-made pleas to their DEHAP counterparts to vent protest via a CHP vote rather than abstention. The CHP in Siirt, based on their dealings with DEHAP there, believe DEHAP's boycott instructions came from the top, not spontaneously from its Siirt supporters.

8) CHP believes that the popularity of the anti-war and anti-US-troops-in-Turkey stance of the party and CHP Chairman Deniz Baykal in particular is helping - but not enough. It would seem perhaps logical that Kurdish voters might reward the CHP and punish AK, as it was the AK cabinet that proposed allowing US troops to come to Turkey and Turkish troops to go into northern Iraq. However, as one frustrated CHP official put it, "DEHAP wants to punish everybody."

9) No CHP official or supporter in Siirt told us that the party would be shut out, nor that it would take all three seats. One seat, or two, if turnout was high in Siirt City, was their refrain.

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DEHAP: Anger at an Anti-Democratic Election  
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10) Not surprisingly, without exception DEHAP members and supporters rejected the upcoming March 9 election as illegitimate and undemocratic. Noting that DEHAP was easily the major party in the province, why was it being blocked from participating this time, they wondered. This was particularly galling, they noted, in light of the fact that two, completely insignificant parties - the Workers Party and the Communist Party - had been allowed to run this time, and were doing so. (Note: While the Communist Party is all but invisible in Siirt right now, the Workers Party has managed to put up posters and run some campaign buses; their slogan is "No to American Soldiers!" End note.).

11) DEHAP people in Siirt do not feel warm towards AK Party. Their demands have not found resonance with this government, and in Siirt they are still waiting for the State to get off their back, i.e., put Kurdish language liberalization into practice, facilitate village returns, end the enforced isolation of Abdullah Ocalan, and in general, as one interlocutor put it, "stop

treating us like animals." Although DEHAP officials acknowledged the logic of expressing disappointment with AK by casting votes for CHP, they said that a boycott and spoiled-vote strategy was preferable. The need to highlight the anti-democratic nature of this election - and of Turkish politics writ large - was the overriding objective.

12) When asked to predict the likely outcome of the election in any case, most DEHAP members handicapped it as a likely 2-1 outcome, with either AK or CHP on top.

HOLTZ